

Playing and learning

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for infants
and toddlers

Infants

Playing and Learning

The first year of your baby's life is very important. Through your love and provision of basic needs – food, shelter and warmth – your child learns to trust you and to become aware of the world.

During this period you develop a happy parent-child relationship and lay the foundation for your child's healthy social, emotional and intellectual growth.

One of the most important ways of developing skills and abilities is through play. Parents should remember, however, that children develop at different rates. It's important that play is appropriate to the child's level of development.

Babies love the company of parents at playtime but are also capable of playing alone if provided with ways to keep amused. They enjoy seeing bright colors, hearing new sounds and feeling the textures of objects around them.

Here are some suggestions on how you can help your child learn – both by self-play and with you.

Self Play

Some ways to keep your child interested while you're busy include:

Feeling – Place your baby on new surfaces – a rug, blanket or smooth surface. Children love to explore and feel different textures.

Seeing – Make a mobile. Use colorful cardboard shapes to hang over the crib. Babies enjoy watching colors and shapes and will start trying to reach them.

An infant seat can be a safe place for your baby when you're busy. Place the seat so your child can watch you. If you're cooking in the kitchen, there are all those new smells to discover too. It should be remembered, however, that a squirming baby can topple such a seat. Position the seat so it can't be tipped over – not on a counter top or other high slippery surface.

Babies enjoy watching themselves in a mirror. Fasten one to the side of the crib.

Hearing – Playing the radio or record player while your baby's awake provides the experience of many new sounds.

Special Games for Infants

When your baby is wide awake and has been fed and changed, it's an ideal time for Mom and Dad to try some special games. Babies enjoy being carried about and seeing the world from different positions. Vary the position – facing up, sideways and upright.

Infants love the human voice and rhythmic sounds. Play finger and toe games like “This little piggy went to market” or hold hands for “Pat-a-cake”.

Speak gently and clearly because your tone of voice and words are important. Some parents say they feel a little foolish talking to a baby, but such ‘conversations’ help speech development and strengthen the parent-child relationship. Singing to your baby is important too.

Other Games

Body Exercises

Babies enjoy moving their bodies. They wriggle, kick, twist and wave arms and legs from the moment they are born. This helps them to discover and learn what they can do. Try holding one arm, and move it gently across the chest to the other side; repeat with the other arm. Do the same with your baby's legs.

Push gently upwards against baby's feet. Notice how your child will push against your hands as the knees bend.

While your baby is lying on his or her back, offer your fingers as a hand-hold. Ease your baby up to a sitting position and slowly down again. After a bath, babies enjoy a body massage with powder.

Sight and Sound Games

Babies often feel sociable and playful after a bath or nap. These are times to consider the following ideas. Please note that these are games for a parent to play *with* a child. Close supervision and involvement are needed to ensure safety and the child's maximum enjoyment.

Objects in a Box – Place safe items like colored blocks and some bright yarn in a box. Try to vary the shape, size, color and texture of the items. While your baby is watching, take out and offer one item at a time. Encourage your baby to hold it and examine it until ready for the next item.

As skills improve, your baby will start reaching for the items. Encourage this.

For variety, attach the items to a string, and let your baby pull them from the box. Add some bells to the string for even more interest. And all the while, talk about the items and what you both are doing.

Reading – Babies love books and magazines. They love to hold them, to look at the pictures, to chew on them and to rip the pages. They also like to put bits of paper in their mouths, so you'll have to supervise to make sure what goes in, comes out.

You can make baby-style books. Glue simple, bright pictures to stiff cardboard, punch holes and fasten with a string. Sit your child on your lap and help turn the pages. Describe the pictures. When interest is lost in one page, turn to the next. Reading to your child, even at an early age, will help develop a positive interest in books.

Noises – Once a baby can grasp an item, it's time for rattles. When your baby is more skilled, show how items can be dropped into a tin or pot and how spoons can be banged together. This type of play helps develop coordination.

Floor Play

During the second half of the first year, babies become mobile. More active games can now be played.

Playing Ball – Roll a ball back and forth. Encourage your baby to go after the ball and push it along the floor.

Tunnels – Large open cardboard cartons, or upturned chairs covered with old sheets make great tunnels for exploring and crawling through. It's even more fun when you join in.

Hide-and-Seek – Around this age, children begin to understand that items still exist even when they've been moved out of view. There are many hide-and-seek games. For example, let your baby see you put an item behind a box, under a blanket or inside a container with an easily removed lid. Encourage your child to find the item. At first you may have to help a bit in the 'seeking'.

Painting – Painting is an enjoyable activity and helps develop coordination. Try finger painting or using brushes, cloth or sponges. The paints must, of course, be non-toxic.

Enjoy Your Time Together

These are just a few examples of activities infants enjoy. It is important to remember that babies also need time to play on their own. Try to recognize when your child is in a sociable mood, then play together. This is an exciting time in a child's development, a time of exploration and growth. Your child will feel secure and loved if you share and show your interest.

The Toddler Years

Games and Learning

The toddler years, from about one to three, are active years. Toddlers love to explore, and seem to get into everything. They ask endless questions and understand more and more complex ideas. They perform social roles such as playing Mom and Dad.

Your toddler will learn by playing with other toddlers, both by sharing and disagreeing. But there will be times when he or she will play alone.

There are a number of excellent TV programs for children, from which they can learn. But a word of caution: TV shouldn't be used as a substitute for a babysitter, or for normal, active playing which is necessary for your child's development. Most of all, a toddler enjoys playing with Mom and Dad.

During these times, 'play-and-learn' games can help teach new skills while the fun is shared by all. By playing these games, you'll be building the key ingredient for a healthy and positive relationship with your child: the love you share.

Here are a few games to try.

Thinking and Playing

Hole-in-the-Pot – In this game, the toddler has to decide whether a square block or a ball will drop through a square or a round hole. Use two containers with plastic lids – coffee cans or ice cream containers. Cut a square hole in one lid and a round hole in the other. The holes should be slightly larger than the blocks and balls.

As skills improve, add some triangular blocks and cut a triangle from a third container lid. Older toddlers will find the game more challenging by sorting through blocks of various shapes to find those that fit the appropriate holes. The blocks and balls could be sorted into various colors. Help your toddler learn about shapes, sizes and sorting. Children learn by trial and error, but they need help when they're stumped.

Bead Stringing – As toddlers approach 18 months, they may be ready to try simple bead-stringing. This requires a parent's involvement, for reasons of safety. Large beads are best, but large empty thread spools can also be used. Shoelaces make good strings. Tie a knot at one end and make the other end stiff by wrapping tape around the last two inches of the lace. Help your child coordinate hands and fingers. When the beads are strung, the creation can be worn proudly as a necklace.

Puzzles – Toddlers enjoy puzzles. Begin with a simple two-piece or three-piece puzzle picturing something familiar such as a dog, cat or vegetable.

Assist with the puzzles by placing the pieces correctly, then encouraging your toddler to put them together.

You and your child can make puzzles together by choosing large, simple pictures from magazines, gluing them to heavy cardboard, and cutting the cardboard into pieces.

Once simple puzzles are mastered, you could cut the pieces smaller to make the game more challenging.

Matching and Sorting – Choose a number of familiar objects, such as a washcloth, bar of soap, a spoon and a cup. Place them on a tray. Cut out magazine pictures of these same objects. Hold up a picture and ask: “Can you find one like this?”

Toddlers soon get the idea. Describe the objects, showing how they are similar to the pictured ones – perhaps the same color or size.

The game can be made more challenging by putting additional objects on the tray for which there are no pictures. Toddlers learn to choose between those that have pictures and those that don’t.

Inexpensive packages of small stickers, some with flowers, some with animals, can also become a game. Encourage your child to sort the stickers into groups – all the flowers in one pile, all the animals in another. Once this game is understood, vary it by showing how to choose only the red or yellow flowers, and only the dogs or tigers. Name the flowers and animals on each sticker. This is helpful in building vocabulary.

Learn by Doing, Touching and Tasting

The Tactile Box Game – You need a number of familiar objects and a closed box with a hole cut in one side. Let your toddler put the objects into the box, or see you do it. The game begins when your child reaches into the box and finds one object. Before pulling it out, ask what it is, and what shape it is. Ask if it’s smooth or rough, large or small, soft or hard. Then let your child pull the object out and see what it is.

Tasting – Children from 18 to 24 months like this game. At mealtime ask your child to taste each food being served and describe the different tastes and textures. Each food could be served in its own small dish. This game teaches the names for tastes and that although some things look alike, they can taste differently. Children, however, should be warned at a very early age not to taste anything that Mom or Dad has not checked.

Painting – Painting is a great way to teach children to express themselves. Give children some non-toxic water paints and they can:

- Brush-paint with a thick-handled big brush;
- Finger-paint;
- Foot-paint, by wetting the soles of their feet with paint and walking on paper; or,
- Sponge-paint. Pieces of sponge cut down to toddler size make interesting brushes.

Expect things to be messy. Make a smock out of an old shirt to protect your child's clothes and put newspapers on the floor to soak up the spills. Then stand back and watch the fun.

Preparing Food – Show your toddler how to prepare simple, safe foods, like a sandwich or a bowl of cereal. Set out the ingredients and describe each of them. Encourage participation. If you both pour the cereal, most of it should hit the bowl.

Physical Activities

Gym – Toddlers love to be active. When they are learning how to walk, place pieces of furniture close together so they totter from one to another.

You can help your child improve walking and balancing skills by setting up simple obstacle courses. Put a few large blocks and cushions on the floor and start a game of follow-the-leader.

Make simple tunnels and mazes from open cardboard boxes, or by draping old sheets over upturned chairs. If your toddler is timid, show the way by crawling through the boxes and under the sheets.

Children have fun and develop muscle coordination by rolling, tumbling, somersaulting and jumping. You can help by supporting your child with your hands.

Dramatic Play

Dramatic play is fun and lets toddlers learn more about the roles adults play and about how people get along with each other.

Dress-up – This is a game all children love playing; and adults enjoy the results. Provide old clothes: hats, scarves, gloves and ties. Children only need a few simple props to make the game more exciting. Toddlers enjoy play-acting but it becomes a special treat when parents join in their fantasies.

These are just a sample of the kind of games parents can invent. Make more play-and-learning activities by following the lead of children, by developing activities based on what is of interest to toddlers. Use your imagination and your child will have fun and learn to be imaginative too.

Books For and About Infants and Toddlers

A great deal has been written to help parents. The following list provides further information on learning while playing. If your local library doesn't have a copy, ask if they can borrow one from another branch.

And while you're at the library, ask about other books of interest to parents and to young children. There's likely someone on staff with several favorite titles to suggest.

Books for Parents

Best Practical Parenting Tips by Vicki Lansky.

I Saw A Purple Cow and 100 Other Recipes for Learning by Ann Cole and others.

What to Do When There's Nothing to Do: 601 Tested Play Ideas for Young Children by Elizabeth Cregg and the Boston Children's Hospital Medical Centre Staff.

Your Baby and Child by Penelope Leach.



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